II

CHARLES LAMB SEES LONDON

TO the visitor in London one practice may be commended if he would know the city: he should cultivate the habit of diving into the most unpromising alleys. For in London dingy and obscure things are not necessarily insignificant, and the past is just around the corner. Start an American tourist down the Strand, with or without a Baedeker, let him follow his nose to Fleet Street, and within half an hour he will have wandered down Middle Temple Lane, which stands for Charles Lamb, and up Johnson's Court, Bolt Court, and Wine Office Court, any of which lead to Gough Square, while all of these places stand for Dr. Johnson. Thus he will have spied out the modest though not contemptible quarters of the two great lovers of London. To these names a third should be added —that of Charles Dickens, but we cannot so easily fix Dickens to a particular spot, ensconced in chambers or in a coffee room—rather he wanders restlessly up and down a hundred shabby courts and squares. The old streets of London tell us that these men were of the earth, earthy; there is a touch of the street gamin, the imp, in Lamb and Dickens; as Dr. Johnson rolls his way along the pavement, we remember that he and Richard Savage once walked the streets half-starved, that he was once advised to get a knot and turn porter, that he exchanged derisive remarks with the watermen on the Thames, that Temple Bar and Covent Garden echoed to his laughter at midnight. All three of them

reached a fairer place than London town, but their feet were planted on her paving stones and their spirits were not smothered by her fog.

The London of Johnson, Dickens, and Lamb was neither mediaeval nor modern. The monuments of early times are more likely to be preserved in the provincial towns that are not trampled by crowds and smitten by the insidious changes of fashion and the fierce demands of progress. For the middle ages we go to the cathedral towns such as Ely, Wells, Canterbury, or Chichester, or to an unhurried market-town like Shrewsbury; nevertheless much more of mediaeval London might have survived if the Great Fire of 1666 had not swept away the old city from London Bridge to the Temple. Farther west, Westminster Abbey and Whitehall survived; at the eastern limit of the burned area stood the immemorial Tower of London, but from 1670 to 1800 most Londoners lived and worked in or near the new city that arose from the ashes of the Great Fire. Within this area Sir Christopher Wren built St. Paul's Cathedral, fifty-two churches, and thirty company halls, and his famous epitaph—"If you seek his monument, look around"—might be applied not only to St. Paul's but to the City at large. Wren's plans for a magnificent capital centering about the cathedral were never realized, and the spires of his churches overlooked crowded courts and squares, brought back to life for us in the pictures of Hogarth. Adjacent to the rebuilt area were a lawyers' quarter, extending from Gray's Inn and Lincoln's Inn to the Temple, and, north of the Strand, a region occupied by coffee-houses, taverns, theatres, and the great market of Covent Garden. This was in particular the London of the eighteenth-century hack-writers. Foreign visitors remarked on the heavy traffic and superabundant life in these densely

populated areas; the London citizen spent much of his time in public, and the same sights, sounds, and, it may be added, smells, were shared by all the generations from the early eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Johnson, Lamb, and Dickens could all find their way about the same city, and this obvious truth may get added point if we pause to remember that Washington Irving would be hopelessly lost in the New York of O. Henry.

In spite of the crowds and the great size of London, the old city was not grandiose or magnificent. These simple facts sound more impressive in the words of Dr. Johnson: "Sir, if you wish to have a just notion of the magnitude of this city, you must not be satisfied with seeing its great streets and squares, but must survey the innumerable little lanes and courts. It is not in the showy evolutions of buildings, but in the multiplicity of human habitations which are crowded together, that the wonderful immensity of London consists." On his visit to Paris in 1822 Lamb remarked: "Paris is a glorious picturesque old city. London looks mean and new to it, as the town of Washington would, seen after *it*. But they have no St. Paul's or Westminster Abbey. The Seine, so much despised by Cockneys, is exactly the size to run through a magnificent street; palaces a mile long on one side, lofty Edinbro' stone (O the glorious antiques!): houses on the other. The Thames disunites London and Southwark." The old City was not strikingly grouped, massed, or centered, although one might view Wren's clustering steeples from the Monument or the dome of St. Paul's. The general impression is well given by the satiric pen of Byron:

> A mighty mass of brick, and smoke, and shipping,
> Dirty and dusky, but as wide as eye
> Could reach, with here and there a sail just slipping
> In sight, then lost amid the forestry

Of masts; a wilderness of steeples peeping
On tip-toe through their sea-coal canopy;
A huge, dun Cupola, like a foolscap crown
On a fool's head—and there is London Town!

London was really an aggregation of towns, each with its own individuality. In 1700 one could name forty-six, besides the City proper and Westminster. This meant that the townsman could have his own retreat and pursue his tranquil way in the midst of the great ant-hill, and that a connoisseur of localities could notice endless interesting differences in the course of a mile's walk. The modern great city gives us the cruel contrast of slum and luxury, gaudy pleasure and ugly business. Such contrasts existed in the earlier London, of course, but it was after all the most middle-class of great cities. If I may pervert a line from Browning, "A common grayness silvered everything." Endless shops, taverns, and coffee-houses gave the town a certain homogeneity, without obscuring the eccentricities and "excellent differences" so dear to the Englishman.

The Temple was the center of Charles Lamb's life in London, and, we may add, the core of the reminiscences which are central for the essays. He was born in Crown Office Row, in the Inner Temple, in 1775, where his father was the confidential servant of an old bencher, Samuel Salt. In his own words:

I was born and passed the first seven years of my life in the Temple. Its church, its hall, its gardens, its fountain—its river, I had almost said, for in those young years what was this king of rivers to me but a stream that watered our pleasant places?—these are of my oldest recollections.

Now the traditions of the Temple reach far back into the Middle Ages. After the Knights Templars came the lawyers in the fourteenth century, when, it is possible, Geoffrey Chaucer, as a student of the Middle Temple, was fined two shillings for beating a Franciscan friar in Fleet Street.

In the Temple Garden, according to tradition, were plucked the red and the white roses that came to symbolize the disastrous wars between York and Lancaster. In Middle Temple Hall Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* was performed in February, 1602. But the Temple did not survive in Johnson's London merely as an odd anachronism. It blended easily with the newly built city of Wren; men such as Johnson himself, Blackstone, Fielding, Cowper, and Goldsmith lived and worked here. It was in and of the life of the Town, yet it offered a retreat from the din and traffic of Fleet Street. Other squares and courts, such as Gray's Inn and the Charterhouse, gave the same effect. Lamb's friend William Wordsworth lived in London in 1797, and wrote of his urban experiences in the seventh book of the *Prelude.* As we all know, Wordsworth was not entirely at ease in London, but no one has better described the quick transition from Fleet Street to the Temple:

> Meanwhile the roar continues, till at length,
> Escaped as from an enemy, we turn
> Abruptly into some sequestered nook,
> Still as a sheltered place when winds blow loud!
> At leisure, thence, through tracts of thin resort,
> And sights and sounds that come at intervals,
> We take our way.
> Private courts,
> Gloomy as coffins, and unsightly lanes
> Thrilled by some female vendor's scream, belike
> The very shrillest of all London cries,
> May then entangle our impatient steps;
> Conducted through these labyrinths, unawares,
> To privileged regions and inviolate,
> Where from their airy lodges studious lawyers
> Look out on waters, walks, and gardens green.

Professor Legouis has suggested that Wordsworth, writing these lines in 1804, may have been influenced by the impressions and sympathies of Lamb himself.

Let us go on to note briefly the places with which Lamb was closely associated. He went to school in Fetter Lane, a short walk from the Temple, and later he was a day pupil at Christ's Hospital, where Coleridge was his fellow-student. The pair of essays called respectively *Recollections of Christ's Hospital* and *Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago* give us complementary reminiscences. In the earlier there is a touch of idealization: the boys go out merrily to swim in the New River near Newington; they enjoy free admission to the Tower; they eat splendidly in public; they wear a quaint costume of which they are very proud. In the later essay the boys return from bathing in the New River "faint and languid"; they go drearily for the fiftieth time to see the sights of the Tower; the food that is served them is abominable; the blue uniform of the school is a badge of slavery. Here pleasing recollections are dashed with that *amari aliquid* which every one not addicted to perfunctory sentimentalism must experience in trying to recover the impressions of early childhood. The country was also within reach, and some of Lamb's most vivid early recollections were of the old residence of his mother's kinsfolk in Hertfordshire. The home counties—Hertfordshire, Kent, Essex, Surrey—were not at that time cut off from the city dweller by long dreary miles of brick and pavement; one passed easily from the city into green fields. But for many years the Lambs lived in the heart of the town. They were in Little Queen Street, Holborn, in 1796, and there occurred the great tragedy which altered the course of Charles Lamb's life. His sister Mary, in a fit of insanity, killed her mother. Life went black for him, and he devoted the rest of his days to salvaging the wreck, to establishing as firm a footing as he could maintain for himself and his sister. For a few years they lived in the dull district of Pentonville, but in

1801 they returned to the Temple. "We can be nowhere private except in the midst of London," Lamb wrote to his friend Manning in that year. To the same correspondent he sent a description of his new lodgings that cannot be bettered:

I live at No. 16 Mitre Court Buildings, a pistol-shot off Baron Maseres'. You must introduce me to the Baron. I think we should suit one another mainly. He lives on the ground floor for convenience of the gout; I prefer the attic story for the air. . . . N. B. When you come to see me, mount up to the top of the stairs. I hope you are not asthmatical, —and come in flannel, for it is pure airy up there. And bring your glass, and I will shew you the Surrey Hills. My bed faces the river, so as by perking up my haunches, and supporting my carcase with my elbows, without much wrying my neck I can see the white sails glide by the bottom of the King's Bench Walk as I lie in my bed.

In 1809 the Lambs moved to Inner Temple Lane, scarce a hundred yards away. But upheavals of this kind were nothing less than cataclysms to people of settled eighteenth-century habits, and Lamb complains of the "dislocation of comfort." He writes to Manning in humorously elegiac mood:

Our place of final destination,—I don't mean the grave, but No. 2 Inner Temple Lane,—looks out upon a gloomy churchyard-like court called Hare Court, with three trees and a pump in it. Do you know it? I was born near it, and used to drink at that pump when I was a Rechabite of six years old.

(In passing, what a chapter of autobiography in that casual word "Rechabite." A Rechabite was under a vow to drink only water. Lamb had long ceased to be a Rechabite.) Poor Mary Lamb lapsed into one of her fits of insanity amid all this excitement, and Lamb was left alone in his new rooms, whence he writes to Coleridge in June; after some sad words about Mary he goes on:

The rooms are delicious, and the best look backwards into Hare Court, where there is a pump always going. Just now it is dry. Hare Court trees come in at the window, so that it's like living in a garden. I try to persuade myself it is much pleasanter than Mitre Court; but, alas! the

household gods are slow to come in a new mansion. They are in their infancy to me; I do not feel them yet; no hearth has blazed to them yet. How I hate and dread new places!

Complex moods, compounded of many simples, underlie these unpretentious words; one hesitates to expound passages like these, but perhaps we may venture to say, in heavy-footed comment, that Lamb makes a tragi-comedy out of the three trees and the dry pump in forlorn little Hare Court. They reappear—the trees have become four—in the essay called *Distant Correspondents:*

I am insensibly chatting to you as familiarly as when we used to exchange good-morrows out of our old contiguous windows, in pump-famed Hare Court in the Temple. Why did you ever leave that quiet corner?—Why did I?—with its complement of four poor elms, from whose smoke-dyed barks, the theme of jesting ruralists, I picked my first ladybirds. My heart is as dry as that pump sometimes proves in a thirsty August, when I revert to the space that is between us.

There was another migration in 1817, when the Lambs moved to Russell Street, Covent Garden. Actually they lived in the building that had once been Will's Coffee House, at the corner of Bow and Russell Streets, where Dryden and the wits had gathered a century and a quarter before; the building had by that time been divided into two private residences. Now they were in the midst of a hubbub; the market, the theatres, the life of the street, all before their very windows. Instead of complaining about the uproar they delighted in it; Mary wrote to Dorothy Wordsworth that she was learning to look out of windows again, and that the carriages coming to take up people after the play, with the "squabbles of the coachmen and linkboys," were a particularly fine sight. It takes more than ordinary zeal to enjoy Covent Garden now; the shabbiness has deepened, the grime has thickened, mud and fog predominate on many days of the year, though there is still the famous display of fruit and flowers in the market if one gets up early enough

to see it. There are still theatres in Covent Garden and in Drury Lane near-by, but time has dealt severely with this famous neighborhood, perhaps because there is no great piece of architecture, no insulated square or garden, to focus tradition and stir the imagination.

We may sum up this subject in the words of a note which Lamb contributed to the *Examiner* in 1813:

> Where would a man of taste chuse his town residence, setting convenience out of the question? Palace-yard,—for its contiguity to the Abbey, the Courts of Justice, the Sittings of Parliament, Whitehall, the Parks, &c.,—I hold of all places in these two great cities of London and Westminster to be the most classical and eligible. Next in classicality, I should name the four Inns of Court: they breathe a learned and collegiate air; and of them chiefly,
>
> those bricky towers
> The which on Thames' broad aged back doth ride,
> Where now the studious lawyers have their bowers;
> There whilom wont the Templar Knights to bide,
> Till they decay'd through pride—
>
> as Spenser describes, evidently with a relish. I think he had Garden Court in his eye. The noble hall which stands there must have been built about that time. Next to the Inns of Court, Covent-Garden, for its *rus in urbe*, its wholesome scents of early fruits and vegetables, its tasteful church and arcades,—above all, the neighbouring theatres cannot but be approved of. I do not know a fourth station comparable to or worthy to be named after these.

Old Palace Yard, in the shadow of the Abbey, is indeed a "classical and eligible" place, but it may be slightly surprising to find Lamb putting it at the top of the list. We have seen that he belonged after all in the City, not in Westminster. Perhaps we can find the secret of his preference in one of his whimsical enthusiasms: he delighted in the whole affair of the Gunpowder Plot, Guy Fawkes was one of his favorite villains, and I believe that he chose Old Palace Yard not just because one could easily step over to the Abbey or the Houses of Parliament, but because Guy Fawkes and some of his fellow-conspirators were most

properly executed there in 1606. With Lamb one must often allow for some underlying whim. The note which I have just quoted goes on to confess a prejudice, or, as he would call it, an "imperfect sympathy":

> To an antiquarian, every spot in London, or even Southwark, teems with historical associations, local interest. He could not choose amiss. But to me, who have no such qualifying knowledge, the Surrey side of the water is peculiarly distasteful. It is impossible to connect anything interesting with it. I never knew a man of taste to live, what they term, *over the bridge*. Observe, in this place I speak solely of *chosen* and *voluntary* residence.

But if Lamb had lived to read the *Pickwick Papers,* if he had witnessed the first appearance of Sam Weller as he polished boots in the courtyard of the White Hart Inn, or been present at the memorable supper which Bob Sawyer gave in his modest lodgings in Lant Street, he might have retracted his sneer at the old Borough of Southwark. And since we are speaking of prejudices, let me say that I should be willing to trade a file of the *American Mercury,* an unread novel by D. H. Lawrence, and a volume of short stories by one of our brightest young men, for one essay on Mr. Pickwick by Charles Lamb.

We must remember that during all these years Lamb was trudging eastward every day to his office, where he sat on a high stool and kept books. From 1789 to 1792 he was in the South Sea House, from 1792 to 1825 in the East India House, where, as he said, his "true works" might be found, "filling some hundred Folios." But it is the old South Sea House where he worked as a mere boy, not the East India House, which he immortalizes in one of the essays of Elia. To quote it would be to read it entire. The temptation to connect Dickens and Lamb is irresistible; their tastes in old city offices were somewhat alike. Both of them loved to describe the encrustations of time, the dust gathering in odd

corners, the doddering and eccentric clerks who dragged out their lives in these retreats. They let their imagination and humor play freely on the subject, innocent or oblivious of the fact that somehow, in these dingy holes, the business of a mighty commercial empire got transacted. Lamb, however, dwells fondly on the past; the East India House is mellowed by age, and the old clerks are delightful oddities. Dickens looks on the past as an incubus; the human spirit, indestructible, mercurial, incalculable, plays over and animates the decaying objects with a kind of life in death.

In 1820, evidently for the sake of Mary's health, the Lambs spent the spring and summer season in the suburb of Stoke Newington; this was the first of a series of suburban residences which the Lambs regarded as a kind of self-imposed exile. Mary expresses their feelings in a letter written in the spring of 1820 from Newington:

> It is so many years since I have been out of town in the spring, that I scarcely knew of the existence of such a season. I see every day some new flower peeping out of the ground, and watch its growth; so that I have a sort of an intimate friendship with each. . . . But flowers are flowers still; and I must confess I would rather live in Russell Street all my life, and never set my foot but on the London pavement, than be doomed always to enjoy the silent pleasures I now do.

About 1823 they gave up their rooms in town, and took a cottage at Islington, a suburb noted in the eighteenth century for its dairies, and for the tea-gardens where the citizens took their recreation on a Sunday. Here Charles discovered the suburban delights of gardening. In 1827 they moved still farther out, to Enfield Chase. Lamb explains to Thomas Hood the mode of life he planned at Enfield:

> Courtiers for a spurt, then philosophers. Old homely tell-truths and learn-truths in the virtuous shades of Enfield. Liars again and mocking gibers in the coffee houses and resorts of London. What can a mortal desire more for his bi-parted nature?

He made the region about Enfield his own; witness a charming topographical letter to Charles Cowden Clarke at the end of 1828:

> A sweeter spot is not in ten counties round; you are knee deep in clover, that is to say, if you are not a middling man's height; from this paradise, making a day of it, you go to see the ruins of an old convent at March Hall, where some of the painted glass is yet whole and fresh. . . . I shall long to show you the clump meadows, as they are called; we might do that, without reaching March Hall. When the days are longer, we might take both, and come home by Forest Cross, so skirt over Pennington and the cheerful little village of Churchley to Forty Hall.

Forty Hall is still in the guide-books, but not these other names. They have been lost in the spread of the great city, which unfortunately swallows up pleasant little detached places and intervening fields. As Mr. E. V. Lucas puts it, the Lamb country described in the letter to Clarke has been "built upon." But the pleasures of the country could not make up for the London Lamb had lost. It was a question of time rather than of space; the old city could not be recaptured by the simple expedient of traveling a few miles in a stage coach. Old friends and old sights were gone. In 1833 they both took refuge in a private asylum at Edmonton, where Lamb died in 1834. Meditating at his grave in Edmonton churchyard, the poet William Watson expressed the feeling that this rural spot was not an appropriate burial place for the city-lover Charles Lamb. Perhaps this discussion has not got far beyond the same commonplace—that Lamb preferred the city to the country. What is more interesting is that he sedulously fostered this idea; a history of his utterances on the subject will be of some value for the light it throws on his life, his literary friendships, and his development as an essayist.

Lamb appears in the 1790's as a satellite of Coleridge's, not much more eminent than forgotten minor men, such as

Coleridge's other associate Robert Lloyd. In the middle of the decade the talk, the enthusiasm, the generous ardor of these young men far outran their verse. Lamb and Coleridge used to foregather at the Salutation and Cat, Newgate Street; Lamb speaks of "that nice little smoky room at the Salutation, which is even now continually presenting itself to my recollection, with all its associated train of pipes, tobacco, Egghot, welsh Rabbits, metaphysics, and poetry." If we except the metaphysics and substitute gin for the egghot, this sounds much like the Lamb we know twenty years later. Some of the excitement of this period gets into the letters of the two friends, but they do not express it memorably in verse. Coleridge was in fact guilty of the "tumid ode and turgid stanza" for which Byron later derided him; Lamb inclined to mawkish effusions (a favorite word with the group) echoing the sentiments of William Lisle Bowles and William Cowper.

Now sentimentalists were expected to prefer the country to the town. Thus Lamb wrote in the summer of 1795, during a walk through the pleasant country of Hertfordshire:

> I turn my back on thy detested walls,
> Proud City, and thy sons I leave behind.

At first sight this appears to be utterly conventional. One might be tempted to cite the opening lines of Dr. Johnson's early satire *London,* in which he mourns the degeneration of the city and asks rhetorically,

> who would leave unbribed Hibernia's land,
> Or change the rocks of Scotland for the Strand?

Who would do all this? The answer would be, "Samuel Johnson himself." If some one asked him in later years—

I hope some one did—whether he really entertained the idea that it would be better to live in Ireland or in the Highlands of Scotland than in London, he might have snorted and answered that when a man is writing satire he is not upon oath. But to return to Lamb's sonnet—if we examine the situation closely we find that we have here not a mere piece of conventional sentiment. Lamb was suffering from the malaise that often overtakes a sensitive young man when he confronts an unfriendly world. The shadow of insanity was upon him; not long before he had been shut up for several weeks in a private asylum at Hoxton. Moreover, this sonnet and its sequel were inspired by an unhappy love affair, of which his biographers, perhaps fortunately, know very little. In 1802 he tried to explain away these early verses, and talked with some bravado of his "aversion from solitude and rural scenes." He continues:

> This aversion was never interrupted or suspended, except for a few years in the younger part of my life, during a period in which I had fixed my affections upon a charming young woman. Every man, while the *passion* is upon him, is for a time at least addicted to groves and meadows and purling streams. During this short period of my existence, I contracted just enough familiarity with rural objects to understand tolerably well ever after the *Poets,* when they declaim in such passionate terms in favour of a country life.

But this quotation takes us ahead of our story. The great crisis of Lamb's life came, as we have said, in September, 1796, when Mary Lamb killed her mother, and Charles Lamb found himself on the edge of the abyss. With the highest courage he wrought out a way of life for himself and Mary; he won through to independence and happiness. How he did this can never be exactly known to us. The biographer hasn't the evidence, nor perhaps if he had it would he have a right to put his own interpretation on it. There was a period of profound distress and uncertainty,

colored by religious feeling, which extends to the middle of 1798. Lamb's best known verses, "The Old Familiar Faces," written in that year, express his sense of the chasm that had opened between him and his past. For a time everything receded into the far distance, and Lamb writes as one old before his time:

> Ghost-like I paced round the haunts of my childhood,
> Earth seemed a desert I was bound to traverse,
> Seeking to find the old familiar faces.
>
> Friend of my bosom, thou more than a brother,
> Why wert not thou born in my father's dwelling?
> So might we talk of the old familiar faces.

Then comes a gap in the letters, and when we take up the thread again, at the end of 1799, we find the Lamb we know—poised, emancipated, meeting Coleridge and Wordsworth as equals. We shall see that he knits his present to his past again by his incomparable vein of pathetic and humorous reminiscence. In some sense he had rejected the spiritual aid and comfort offered by these friends, and carried on alone.

Now for our subject it is important to notice that the consolation Coleridge offered to Lamb at this time was the religion of the Lake School, the doctrine of the healing influence of nature. Innocuous as this doctrine may appear, Lamb could not accept it, at least in the spirit in which it was offered, and, significantly enough, from this period date his whimsical exaltation of London and his equally whimsical rejection of the romantic cult of rural life. In July, 1797, Lamb visited the Coleridges and the Wordsworths at Nether Stowey. This is the memorable occasion on which "dear Sara" [Mrs. Coleridge] spilled boiling milk on Coleridge's foot, so that he could not walk over the Quantock Hills with his friends. In their absence he wrote the lines

called "This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison," containing his tribute to Lamb:

> Now my friends emerge
> Beneath the wide wide heaven—and view again
> The many-steepled tract magnificent
> Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,
> With some fair bark, perhaps, whose sails light up
> The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles
> Of purple shadow! Yes! they wander on
> In gladness all; but thou, methinks, most glad,
> My gentle-hearted Charles! for thou hast pined
> And hungered after Nature, many a year,
> In the great City pent, winning thy way
> With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain
> And strange calamity! Ah! slowly sink
> Behind the Western ridge, thou glorious Sun!
> Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,
> Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds!
> Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!
> And kindle, thou blue Ocean! so my friend
> Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
> Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round,
> On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
> Less gross than bodily; and of such hues
> As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes
> Spirits perceive his presence.

Noble lines, surely, but what is Lamb's response? He does not relish the compliment. His comments are vehement, quizzical, and even ungracious:

> In the next edition, please to blot out 'gentle-hearted' and substitute drunken-dog, ragged-head, odd-eyed, stuttering or any other epithet which truly and properly belongs to the gentleman in question.
>
> For God's sake (I never was more serious), don't make me ridiculous any more by terming me gentle-hearted in print, or do it in better verses. It did well enough five years ago when I came to see you, and was moral coxcomb enough at the time you wrote the lines, to feed upon such epithets; but, besides that the meaning of gentle is equivocal at best, and almost always means poor-spirited, the very quality of gentleness is abhorrent to such vile trumpetings. My *sentiment* is long since vanished. I hope my *virtues* have done *sucking*. I can scarce think but you meant it in joke. I hope you did, for I should be ashamed to think that you could think to gratify me by such praise, fit only to be a cordial to some green-sick sonnetteer.

Involved in these remarks are religious humility, a break with the sentimental cult of the 'nineties and the natural religion of the Lake School, and, I think we must add, a certain resentment at the patronizing attitude of the Lakers. Soon afterwards there was a temporary estrangement from Coleridge largely on these grounds. I detect to the very end a tendency to speak of "poor Charles Lamb." Coleridge, in the throes of the opium habit, deplores Lamb's unseemly association with William Hazlitt in those long evenings when Lamb and Hazlitt both smoked and drank gin, forsooth. Wordsworth could be mawkish enough to write in Lamb's memory:

> From the most gentle creature nursed in fields
> Had been derived the name he bore.

If Lamb heard of this tribute in the Elysian fields, I wonder, considering that he was a connoisseur in puns, what comment he stammered to the sympathetic shade of Sir Thomas Browne! Wordsworth and Coleridge were dearly esteemed friends of his to the last, but he could not surrender to them or abdicate his individuality.

His best defence was humor, and by 1800 we find him whimsically maintaining the thesis that London is good enough for him, let the Lakes of Westmoreland and Cumberland be what they may. As Lamb's able French biographer Derocquigny notes, a series of dithyrambs appears in praise of London in the letters of 1800 and 1801, and these are among the earliest of the richly humorous passages in his correspondence. All of them make direct and quizzical reference to Wordsworth and Coleridge. The longest is in response to an invitation from Wordsworth. It has often been quoted, but let us consider it again in its setting:

> . . . I ought before this to have reply'd to your very kind invitation to Cumberland. With you and your Sister I could gang any where. But

I am afraid whether I shall ever be able to afford so desperate a Journey. Separate from the pleasure of your company, I don't much care if I never see a mountain in my life. I have passed all my days in London, until I have formed as many and intense local attachments, as any of you mountaineers can have done with dead nature. The Lighted shops of the Strand and Fleet Street, the innumerable trades, tradesmen and customers, coaches, waggons, playhouses, all the bustle and wickedness round about Covent Garden, the very women of the Town, the Watchmen, drunken scenes, rattles,—life awake, if you awake, at all hours of the night, the impossibility of being dull in Fleet Street, the crowds, the very dirt & mud, the Sun shining upon houses and pavements, the print shops, the old book stalls, parsons cheap'ning books, coffee houses, steams of soups from kitchens, the pantomimes, London itself a pantomime and a masquerade, —all these things work themselves into my mind and feed me, without a power of satiating me. The wonder of these sights impells me into night-walks about her crowded streets, and I often shed tears in the motley Strand from fulness of joy at so much Life.—All these emotions must be strange to you. So are your rural emotions to me. But consider, what must I have been doing all my life, not to have lent great portions of my heart with usury to such scenes?—

My attachments are all local, purely local. I have no passion (or have had none since I was in love, and then it was the spurious engendering of poetry & books) to groves and vallies. The rooms where I was born, the furniture which has been before my eyes all my life, a book case which has followed me about (like a faithful dog, only exceeding him in knowledge) wherever I have moved—old chairs, old tables, streets, squares, where I have sunned myself, my old school,—these are my mistresses. Have I not enough, without your mountains? I do not envy you. I should pity you, did I not know, that the Mind will make friends of any thing. Your sun & moon and skys and hills & lakes affect me no more, or scarcely come to me in more venerable characters, than as a gilded room with tapestry and tapers, where I might live with handsome visible objects. I consider the clouds above me but as a roof, beautifully painted but unable to satisfy the mind, and at last, like the pictures of the apartment of a connoisseur, unable to afford him any longer a pleasure. So fading upon me, from disuse, have been the Beauties of Nature, as they have been confinedly called; so ever fresh & green and warm are all the inventions of men and assemblies of men in this great city.

Picture William Wordsworth reading this, and solemnly deprecating dear Charles's harmless prejudices. When Lamb actually visited the Lakes he was enchanted and abashed by the beauties of the region, but protected himself, so he said, by thinking of the ham and beef shop near St.

Martin's Lane. To the very last the thought of Wordsworth moved him to such utterances. In 1830 he wrote to his friend about the dulness of Enfield:

> O let no native Londoner imagine that health, and rest, and innocent occupation, interchange of converse sweet and recreative study, can make the country anything better than altogether odious and detestable. A garden was the primitive prison till man with promethean felicity and boldness luckily sinned himself out of it. Thence followed Babylon, Nineveh, Venice, London, haberdashers, goldsmiths, taverns, playhouses, satires, epigrams, puns—these all came in on the town part and the thither side of innocence. Man found out inventions.

So it came about that Wordsworth, in that excellent but somewhat priggish elegy which I have quoted, says rather heavily:

> Thou wert a scorner of the fields, my Friend,
> But more in show than truth.

Others among Lamb's friends played up to this prejudice, and Hazlitt compares Lamb in the country to "the most capricious poet Ovid among the Goths."

Lamb's letters are often a proving-ground for ideas which were later transferred to the essays. The earliest example of this which I have found is the use which he makes of the London passages of 1801 and 1802 in an essay written as the first of a series to be called *The Londoner,* published in February, 1802. But this early piece is not a full-fledged essay of Elia; the writer here follows the model of the eighteenth-century periodical essay, and talks for the most part as sedately as Addison. Lamb evidently felt that he was not in the right key here, for he did not continue to publish Londoners, and it was more than twenty years later that the essays of Elia began to appear in the *London Magazine.* The core of the essays is youthful reminiscence. Of the first series five, and those among the most famous, are set on such topics: *The South Sea House, Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago, The Old Benchers of the*

Inner Temple, The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers, A Complaint of the Decay of Beggars in the Metropolis. All these, we may note, are the very cream of the essays; there is nothing in the second series to match them for topography and autobiography, except the incomparable *Old China.* Lamb's way of capturing the genius of a place is to identify it with his past self, and to set it forth in sudden glints of reminiscence. From Coleridge and Wordsworth he learned of the glory of childhood and the place of memory in poetry, though he would not be of their opinion about man and nature.

If we put Lamb in historical perspective, we see that in him the rich and coarse humors of the eighteenth century, set forth grossly and powerfully by Smollett and Hogarth, wire-drawn to mannerism and eccentricity by Sterne, were purged of their grossness and softened. Despite his love of all the sights and sounds of London life, he does not crowd his pages with faithful detail as does Gay in the remarkable set of verses called *Trivia, or The Art of Walking the Streets of London,* or as Hogarth does in his pictures; he does not give us an Aristophanic hodge-podge or a catalogue in the manner of Walt Whitman. He does not try to stem the full tide of life. Nor does he follow the newer mode of the romantic local colorists of his day, who systematically exploited the picturesque possibilities of places. For the difference, compare one of Washington Irving's London pieces in the *Sketch Book—London Antiques,* for example, with the treatment of the same subject by Lamb. Irving is consciously the tourist, underscoring the quaint and the antique. He may not pass this way again, so he tries to put all the stars and double stars into his own guide book. Even Scott follows much the same method in his delightful sketches of Edinburgh—neglected by the

modern reader—prefixed to the *Chronicles of the Canongate*. But Lamb is careful and parsimonious in his choice of details, invests them with humorous reminiscent lyricism, and sets them in a literary context.

His grotesques are Cockneyism transfigured. Consider how he transforms the humble chimney-sweeper. Dickens might have made of Lamb's chimney-sweepers a bold fantasy in black and white. Irving would have explained that chimney-sweepers are a part and parcel of Merry England, and might have added a note on Elizabethan chimneys. Lamb treats them at one moment in the spirit of a song of innocence by William Blake—"I have a kindly yearning towards these dim specks—poor blots—innocent blacknesses," and in the next he jumps to a literary analogy of exquisite mock-heroic quality:

> I seem to remember having been told that a bad sweep was once left in a stack with his brush, to indicate which way the wind blew. It was an awful spectacle, certainly; not much unlike the old stage direction in Macbeth, where the "Apparition of a child crowned, with a tree in his hand, rises."

We may say that childhood memory, the present and actual, and the contents of beloved books are on the same level for Elia. His London beggars are compared to illustrations in some collection of broadside ballads:

> The Mendicants of this great city were so many of her sights, her lions. I can no more spare them than I could the Cries of London. No corner of a street is complete without them. They are as indispensable as the Ballad Singer; and in their picturesque attire as ornamental as the signs of old London. They were the standing morals, emblems, mementoes, dial-mottoes, the spital sermons, the books for children, the salutary checks and pauses to the high and rushing tide of greasy citizenry.

But the best and most famous illustration of the way in which Lamb fused London and literature and reminiscence is in the superb passage of the essay called *Old China,* when

Bridget Elia (Mary Lamb) is speaking to her brother of the early days when they were happy and poor:

> Do you remember the brown suit, which you made to hang upon you, till all your friends cried shame upon you, it grew so threadbare—and all because of that folio Beaumont and Fletcher, which you dragged home late at night from Barker's in Covent Garden? Do you remember how we eyed it for weeks before we could make up our minds to the purchase, and had not come to a determination till it was near ten o'clock of the Saturday night, when you set off from Islington, fearing you should be too late—and when the old bookseller with some grumbling opened his shop, and by the twinkling taper (for he was setting bedwards) lighted out the relic from his dusty treasures—and when you lugged it home, wishing it were twice as cumbersome—and when you presented it to me—and when we were exploring the perfectness of it (*collating,* you called it)—and while I was repairing some of the loose leaves with paste which your impatience would not suffer to be left till day-break—was there no pleasure in being a poor man?

Lamb's London is a place where the contents of the folio Beaumont and Fletcher and the shop in Covent Garden where he bought it are on the same footing; if he goes to the play, the drama, the actors, and the theatre (that is, the playhouse itself) are of equal importance. In the essay *On Some of the Old Actors,* he tells us how one day he was walking in the gardens of Gray's Inn—superior even to his beloved Temple—where Bacon once walked before him, when he met the old actor Dodd, and immediately thought of all the comic parts he had seen Dodd play. The combination is characteristic of Lamb.

Lamb does not subordinate things and places to people, nor yet does he make people mere accessories to things and places. Rather he discovers a preëstablished harmony between the two; he submerges both in a common medium. We must borrow an illustration from Coleridge: as Lamb looked back at his old self and at the homely old places he knew, he found both invested with a strange charm, like that which moonlight gives to a familiar landscape. Coleridge used

this figure to describe the power of imagination; Lamb, instead of talking about imagination, dwelt on particulars and kept the whole transaction personal and private. His views of his own past, of the relations between people and places, are important instances of the odd scheme of sympathies and antipathies ("imperfect sympathies") which spreads like a subtle web through the essays. But all this analysis will be happily superseded if you will read Elia again and draw your own conclusions.

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